

22 MAY 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Director for Management and Services


SUBJECT : GAO Report to Congress on the "Need to Improve
Language Training Programs and Assignments for
U.S. Government Personnel Overseas"

1. During the past two years the Government Accounting Office conducted a review of U.S. Government foreign language training programs and the language aspects of assigning personnel overseas. The final report was submitted to Congress on 22 January 1973. This memorandum summarizes some of the conclusions and recommendations that may have relevance to CIA even though intelligence agencies were excluded from the report because of the classified nature of their activities. It is probable that in future budget hearings Congress may ask CIA about its language activities with reference to the GAO findings.

2. Background

In 1960 Congress amended the Foreign Service Act making it congressional policy that all members of the Foreign Service speak the principal language of the countries to which they are assigned. The amendment further stipulated that those positions requiring the incumbent to be proficient in a foreign language be so identified and staffed. Although this legislation is not directly applicable to all agencies and departments operating overseas, GAO believes it represents congressional policy toward all agencies having requirements for language-proficient personnel. The GAO study therefore was made to identify, on a Government-wide basis, the magnitude of foreign language training activity, to evaluate the fulfillment of foreign language needs, and to determine whether improvements were needed in the use of resources devoted to foreign language training in the U.S. Government.

3. Principal Conclusions of the GAO Report

- The intent of the 1960 legislation has not been met. During the past decade there has been little progress toward substantially raising the foreign language competence of U.S. representatives overseas.
 - In virtually all agencies studied, language-essential positions were staffed with individuals lacking the required foreign language competence.
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--- Key factors hindering the attainment of increased foreign language competence overseas were:

- a. lack of emphasis on the use of personnel with foreign language capability;
- b. lack of criteria for identifying foreign language requirements; and
- c. inadequate proficiency testing.

--- Part-time language training is a poor substitute for full-time training and should not be used as such.

--- More systematic coordination of foreign language training and research is needed among federal agencies.

4. GAO Recommendations

--- Assign language-proficient staff to positions overseas that require language competence.

--- Provide individuals with appropriate language training before they assume duties in language-essential positions overseas.

--- Develop adequate criteria for overseas posts to use in identifying the level of proficiency required for each position.

--- Periodically reassess language requirements for overseas positions.

--- Develop tests and testing procedures that will adequately measure language proficiencies.

--- Provide for mandatory retesting of individuals before assigning them to language-essential position overseas.


--- Periodically retest all those with language proficiency so that assignments to duty or training can be made on the basis of current capabilities.

--- Expand coordination of individual research programs and develop procedures for making research results available Government-wide.

5. Also noteworthy is that GAO has emphasized to Congress that they believe the present level of foreign language training in the executive branch to be sufficient to meet current needs, provided a greater weight is given to the language capability factor in selecting people for overseas assignment.


6. The agencies studied generally agreed with GAO's conclusions and recommendations and cited corrective actions planned or already taken. For example, the State Department advised GAO in August of 1972 that it had invited those agencies involved to meet and begin discussions as to the most effective means of achieving closer coordination and the sharing of resources. This is being done through the expanded activities of the Interagency Language Roundtable of which OTR's Language School is a member.

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